Chaco Culture
National Historical Park
National Park Service

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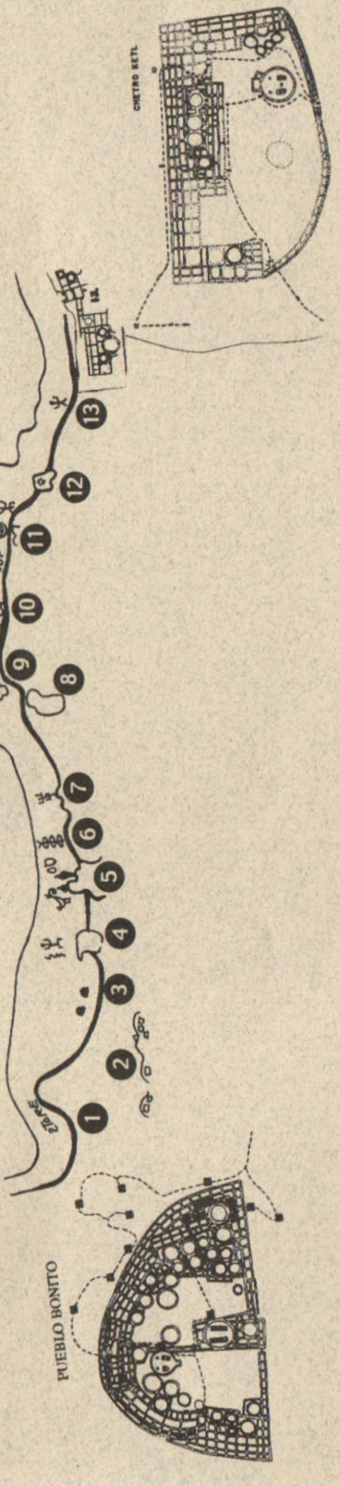
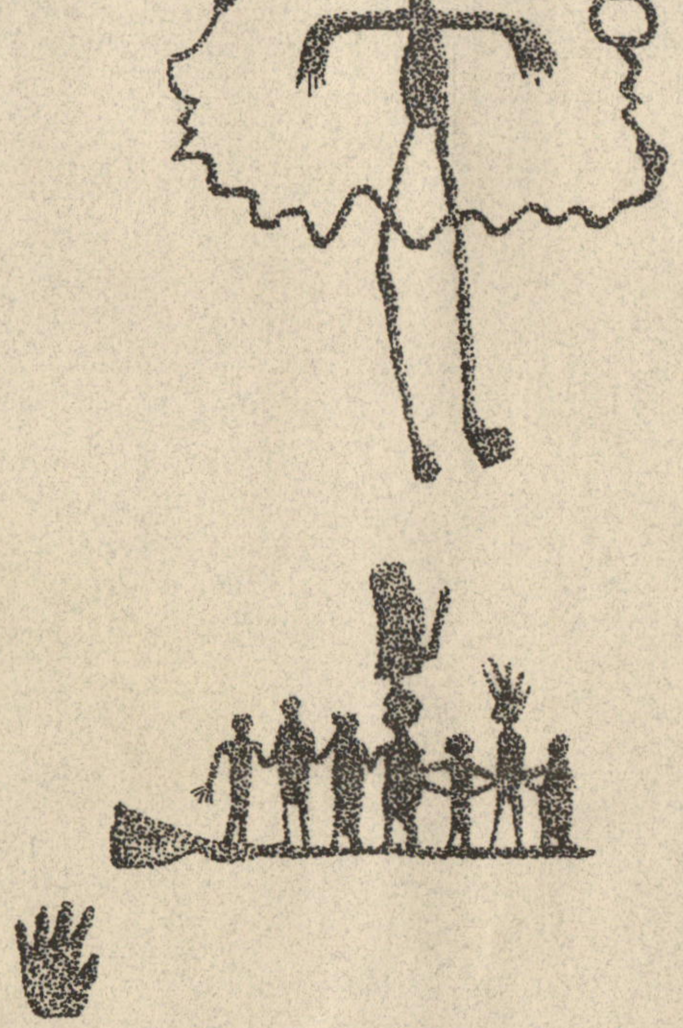
Petroglyph Trail

Pueblo Bonito to Chetro Ketl

PETROGLYPH TRAIL
PUEBLO BONITO TO CHETRO KETL



PLEASE STAY ON THE TRAIL.
BRING YOUR BINOCULARS.



On the cliff face above the Wetherill Cemetery you can see human-like figures standing on a line. The use of this line in southwestern petroglyph panels is very unusual.

A very special thanks to our friends, neighbors, and colleagues from the Chaco American Indian Consultation Committee and from the Hopi Historic Preservation Office who help us to better understand the history and legacy of their Chacoan ancestors. Thanks also to Jane Kolber for providing insights, artwork, and her ongoing dedication to the preservation of the past.

Other Petroglyph and Pictograph Sites in Chaco

Along the Peñasco Blanco Trail, beginning 500 feet beyond Casa Chiquita. (*3 miles round trip*)

The "Super Nova Panel" along the Peñasco Blanco Trail. (*6 miles round trip*)

At the Wetherill Cemetery, northwest corner. Use binoculars to look up at the panel on the cliff wall above the high ledge. (*1/4 mile round trip*)

Above Una Vida. (*1 mile round trip*)

Behind the Campfire Circle in the campground.

On the boulder across from the tent loop restroom in the campground.

Welcome to the Petroglyph Trail

Petroglyph Trail is 1/4-mile long, and it will take you along the canyon wall past many ancient images. Let the trail guide your eyes and feet while you learn about some of Chaco Canyon's many petroglyphs—images carved into the soft sandstone surface by a sharp-edged object—and pictographs—images painted on rock surfaces.

Begin at Pueblo Bonito (past Stop 2) or at Chetro Ketl (past Stop 12). Follow the numbered stops which correspond to the numbered items in this trail guide. The trail follows the base of the cliff. For best viewing and photography opportunities, and to help protect Chaco's precious cultural sites, stay on the trail. Never touch the petroglyphs. The oils on your fingers, abrasion by objects, and liquids are harmful. **And don't forget to bring your binoculars!**

The cultural sites of Chaco Culture National Historical Park are fragile and irreplaceable.They are part of the history and traditions of the Hopi, the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico, and the Navajo, who continue to respect and honor them.

In 1987, the park received international recognition for its cultural resources through designation as a World Heritage Site. Help protect and preserve this significant part of our global cultural heritage by following these basic rules:

> *Do not collect pottery or other protected artifacts, plants, or rocks anywhere in the park. Do not walk, climb, sit, or lean on fragile walls. Stay on designated trails. Do not deface, add to, or alter the petroglyphs, pictographs, and rocks. Do not climb canyon walls. Children should remain with the guardian responsible for their safety. Pets are not permitted in the cultural sites.*

If we all take responsibility for these sites, they will be here for the education and enjoyment of those who come after us.

This is a sacred area. Please visit with respect.

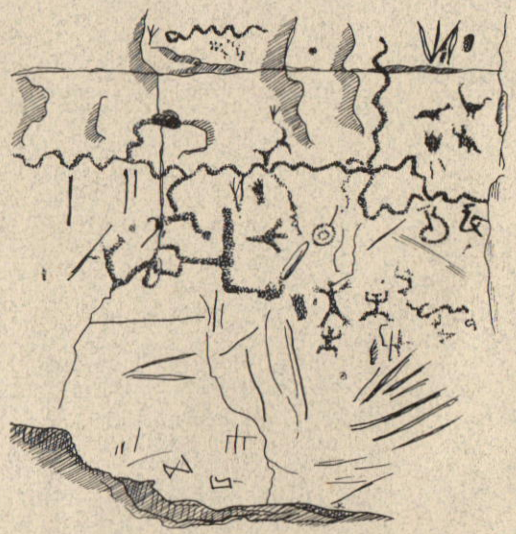
As you walk, look at the canyon walls. If the lighting and time of day permit, you can see some of the thousands of unique, fascinating, and sometimes mysterious images that the Chaco people created on rock surfaces and learn about Chaco's enduring cultural legacy.

At Chaco and throughout the American Southwest rock images were probably intended mostly as visual communications—clan symbols, records of important events during migrations, and memory aids for recalling stories, songs, and ceremonies. Today, descendants often recognize Chaco's petroglyphs and pictographs as records of the migrations of clans and as other affirmations of meaningful and ongoing associations with sites.

Petroglyph and pictograph images can be found on rocks throughout the world. In many countries, they are called *arte rupestre*, which means "outdoor art." Rock art is the popular term in this country. The Hopi people here in the Southwest call them *tutuveni*, which means "marks of those before."

Why Petroglyphs and Pictographs Matter

Archeology can tell us a great deal about a people's material culture—about their homes, tools, foods, pottery, and other tangible possessions. Rock images can give us insights into what the people thought and how they expressed their ideas to themselves and others. Even though the meanings of some images are mysterious, we appreciate them for their aesthetic and technical values.



Some people believe that petroglyphs and pictographs were executed for special purposes such as ceremony, astronomy, hunting, clan and individual identification, and for marking the routes of migrations. Others believe that they represent forms of visual communication, ceremonialism, artistic expression, and connections to the creators.

While interpretations of rock art images differ widely, what we do know is that, to many native descendants, the images are not forgotten relics from the distant past. Rather they are integral parts of ongoing traditions that began in Chaco and other areas millennia ago, and still have importance and meaning in their lives today.

The staff at Chaco Culture National Historical Park hopes that you find your own special meaning and importance in the fascinating images from the past that you have seen along the Petroglyph Trail today.

We hope that your own firsthand experience will involve you directly in their stewardship and preservation—here at Chaco and throughout the world.

12 Are Petroglyphs Forever?

The petroglyphs have lasted for centuries although time has taken a tremendous toll. Forces of wind, rain, and freeze-thaw cycles, as well as natural staining, mud, and lichens, have worn some of them away and caused others to break off. Over time, many more petroglyphs will be lost.

Spirals

The faint spiral design you see on the fallen boulder represents Chaco Canyon's most common image. Fully half of the park's petroglyph panels contain spirals. Indeed, spirals are one of the most common rock images in the world. But do spirals mean the same thing to all people?

Pueblo descendants say that spirals represent emergence and migration. Spirals like "the Sun Dagger" on Fajada Butte were used to track and commemorate the movement of the sun throughout the year—essential for planning ceremonies and agriculture.

13 What Do Rock Images Mean?

The Chacoan people lived in a world that was very different from our world today. They created this figure hundreds of years ago. Take a moment to ponder this figure. Is it a person? An animal? A supernatural being? We know that the images are far more than just art or imitation of the natural world. They are powerful cultural symbols that reflect the complex society and religion of the Pueblo peoples.

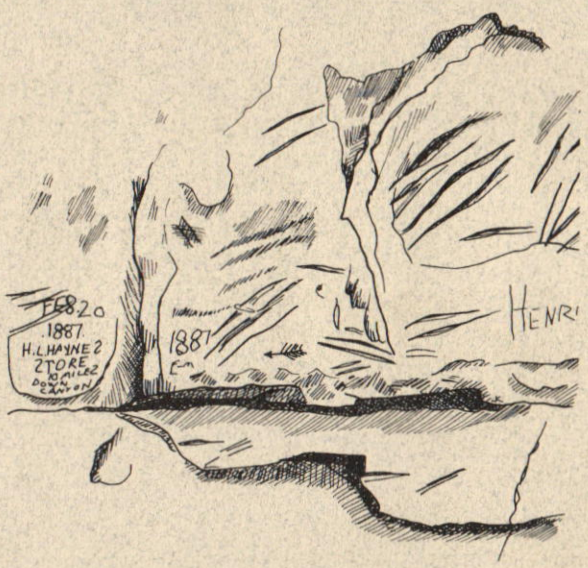
Along the Trail

1 Grooves and Holes

Researchers have many different explanations for the presence of these depressions on canyon walls. Often, grooves are situated close to large natural holes that have been enlarged. Perhaps they were used for sharpening tools such as axes, awls, and knives during the ongoing construction of the Chacoan great houses and buildings. But why are so many of these grooves and holes grouped together?

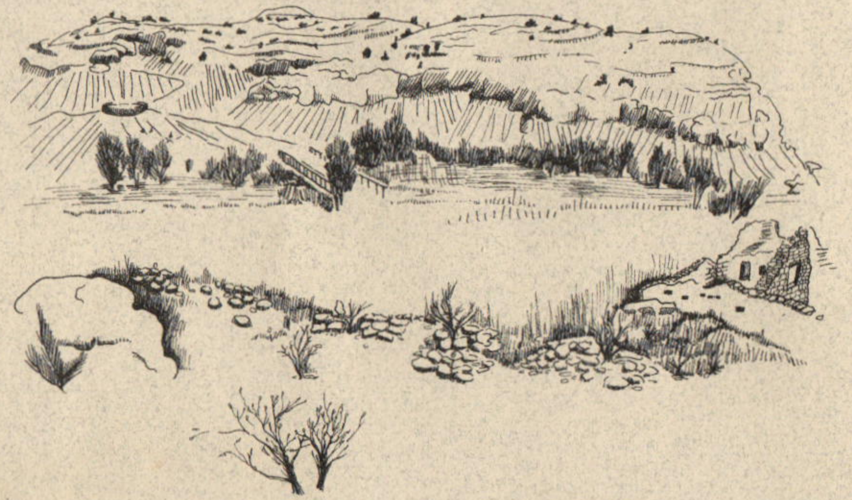
Historic Inscriptions or Graffiti?

People throughout history have left historic inscriptions on convenient rock surfaces in Chaco Canyon. These inscriptions provide information about early travelers and residents in this area. Early Spaniards left them, as did Euro-Americans, the U.S. Army, and early Hispanic sheepherders. One inscription even seems to be an advertisement for a trading post! How do such historic inscriptions differ from graffiti?

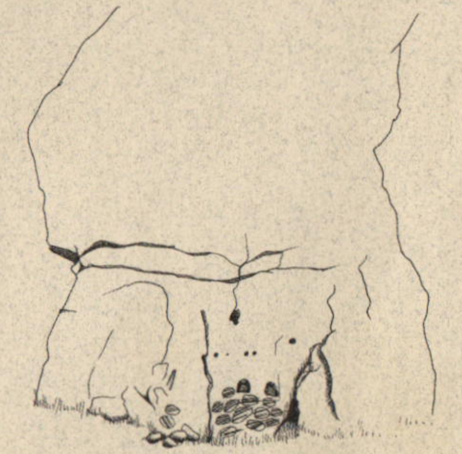


2 Rock-Covered Hills?

Look around you at the rock-covered hills. They are actually rubble mounds, the fallen walls of buildings, ramps, and platforms from a site near Pueblo Bonito. These structures were built after A.D. 1100–late in Chaco's building cycle—and may represent a subsequent extension of Pueblo Bonito.

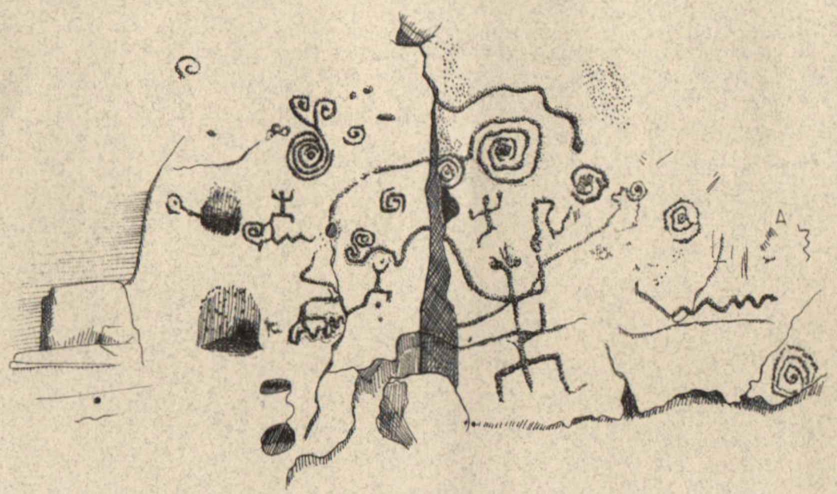


In the 1100s and 1200s, significant changes came to Chaco. Builders completed little new construction on the large great houses such as Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl, yet they erected many smaller buildings throughout the canyon. The traditions, architecture, and pottery of these builders were different than the earlier great house builders. Were the Chaco people changing and evolving into new lifeways, or were new populations moving into Chaco and using the older buildings in new ways?



3 Beam-seats

The holes you see in the cliff walls indicate where rooms once stood against the cliff. These beam seats were pecked into the cliff, and the roof and ceiling beams of multi-storied buildings were set into them. From the trail, you can also see the same kinds of grooves that you see at Stop 2. These grooves appear to have been made before the beam seat holes. Please stay on the trail so you won't disturb construction rubble containing cultural materials.



11 Images and Architecture

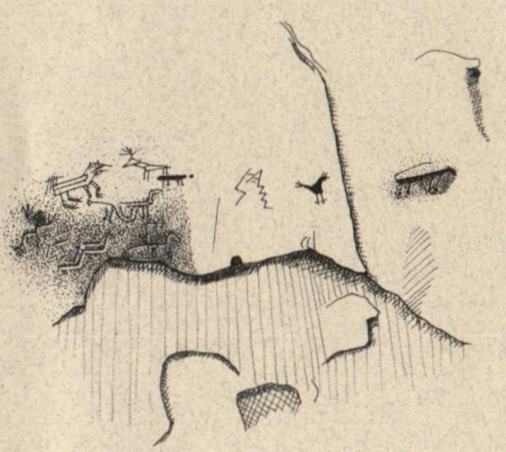
Most of Chaco Canyon's petroglyph panels include spirals and open-armed, open-legged stick figures like the ones found here. As is the case elsewhere in Chaco, they are closely associated with buildings. Most images face either south or east. Although no accurate dating methods have been developed for rock carvings, their presence near buildings may indicate that they were made when the buildings were in use (A.D. 850 to 1250).

Re-Worked Petroglyphs

Sometimes petroglyphs were carefully re-pecked in ancient times. Because these marks on top of petroglyphs are covered with centuries old patinas (iron oxide stains that naturally darken the rock surfaces) it indicates that people re-pecked the petroglyphs after their original execution to make them more visible. Today, re-pecking—as well as chalking and tracing—are considered damaging to petroglyphs and should never be done.

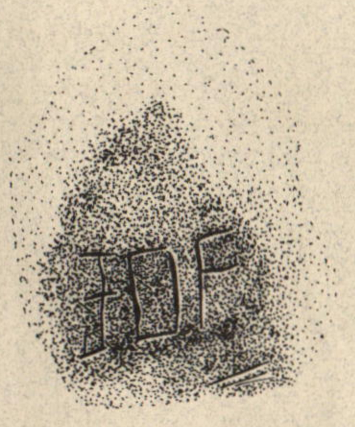
10 Historic Inscriptions

The Navajo have lived in Chaco Canyon for several hundred years. They deeply incised many images on the rocks using sharp stones, knives, and nails. Others were painted. Many of these drawings depict events, ceremonies, holy people, horses, cars, buildings, and trains. Spaniards brought horses into the American Southwest during the sixteenth century. Navajo people during that period, or later, probably scratched these horse-and-rider petroglyphs into the rock.



More Graffiti

These modern initials scratched into the rock represent vandalism that affects Chaco Canyon's early rock art. Does it detract from the older images? Why is placing your own name or own drawing on a rock surface considered vandalism? What would happen if every visitor placed a mark on a rock or cliff? What would the loss be for all of us?

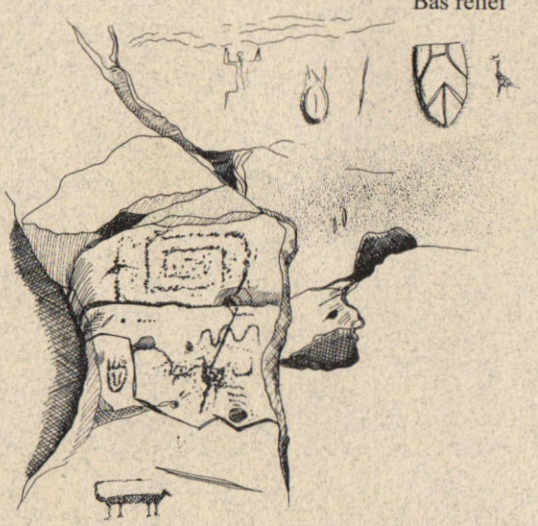


4 High Panels

Look at the grouping of images high up on the cliff face, in the middle of a gray, circular-shaped surface. This area may have been chosen to frame the images. It's difficult to imagine how the Chacoans were able to reach 15 feet above the ground to carve these petroglyphs—but ladders, timbers, ropes, and scaffolding are possibilities. You can see such elevated panels throughout Chaco Canyon. Their placement was an important consideration to the Chacoans.

5 Techniques and Tools

Chaco Canyon petroglyphs are unique in many ways. Chacoan people pecked petroglyphs into the rocks using hard hammerstones—sometimes with strikers, for greater accuracy and control. They used sharp-edged stones for incising and scratching. Abrasions to prepare a surface or to fill in a figure were formed by rubbing a smooth stone sideways against the rock surface. The people also used sharp objects to drill small holes. Chaco is the only known place in the world where the techniques of pecking, incising, abrading, and drilling were all combined in a single image. The bird image shows the use of these techniques.

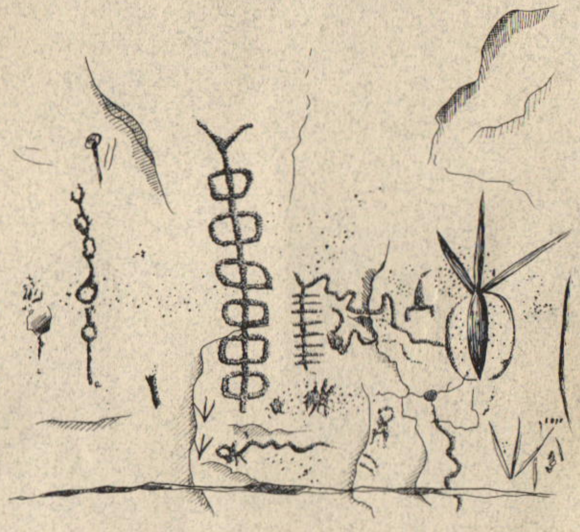


The Chaco people created the paints used in their pictographs by grinding up minerals such as calcium carbonate (white), hematite and ochre (red), and charcoal (black), and then mixing them with a binder, such as plant or animal oils, eggs, blood, or urine, to adhere the paint to the surface. Currently scientists are working to date this organic matter. Notice the remnants of white paint about three feet above the bird image.

Here at Chaco you can also see a rare technique, previously known only on Easter Island called *bas relief*—in which the background has been carved back, or depressed, and the images protrude forward.

6 Complex Panels

Here, and elsewhere at Chaco, you will see many different images that appear to have been arranged purposefully, as though the reason for creating them was significant. Perhaps rock art sites like this one were used again and again over time.



7 Incised Petroglyphs

Here are examples of petroglyphs, which were created by taking a sharp edged object and carving into the soft sandstone surface. Notice how graffiti—a modern form of vandalism—detracts from and defaces these petroglyphs.

8 Why Are There No Images Here?

This big boulder might seem to be an ideal location for petroglyphs, but there are none there. Why did the creators of Chaco's rock art choose the places they did to place their images?

9 Puebloan Katsina

This faint katsina image is believed to have been painted by one of the Zuni Pueblo crew members during archeologist Neil Judd's excavations of Pueblo Bonito and Pueblo del Arroyo for the National Geographic Society between 1921 and 1927.